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Rivers of Earth and Troublesome Creeks: The Agrarianism of James Still

H. R. Stoneback

In those days everybody knew everybody else, and knew what he was doing, and what his father and grandfather had done before him, and you even knew what everybody ate; and when you saw somebody passing, you knew where he was going, and families didn't scatter all over the place, and people didn't go away to die in the poor-house.

Giovanni Verga¹

In spite of a good deal of recognition in Appalachian circles, and in spite of ample acknowledgment of his achievement by fellow practitioners of the craft of fiction, we have not yet claimed James Still as an important Southern writer, a significant figure in the Southern Renaissance. This essay addresses Still's place in the traditions both of Appalachian and Southern literature, to discover fresh perspectives, new avenues. Through examination of Still's association with Vanderbilt University, we may arrive at some useful sense of his version of agrarianism, his lyrical variation on one of the paradigms of Southern literature and experience. Through study of his masterpiece, *River of Earth*, we may find a way of according Still his place in literary history, a terrain which he shares not so much with other Appalachian writers, such as John Fox and Jesse Stuart, as with such masters of the modern Southern novel as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, such acute chroniclers of various "postage stamps" of earth as Faulkner, and, in a wider sense, such delineators of place and the *genius loci* as William Wordsworth.

James Still was born in Lafayette, Alabama in 1906. A rural area of ridges and low hills, a dying echo of Appalachia, Lafayette is an upland area similar in some ways to the Kentucky hills where Still has long been rooted. In 1929 he received his A.B. degree from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. Much has been made of the fact that at Lincoln Memorial Still was

a classmate of Jesse Stuart as well as a student of Harry Harrison Kroll, both important regional writers. In fact, however, Still never had a class with Stuart, and they did not, as Still observes, "run together." As for Kroll, though Still had a class with him, the contact was limited, and Kroll, as Still says, "never saw a manuscript of mine."² Another celebrant of the Appalachian myth, Don West, was at Lincoln Memorial University, though Still did not know him well until they were together at Vanderbilt. While it may be remarkable that four such writers identified with Appalachia were at an obscure college in the Tennessee hills at the same time, there is no evidence of influence or significant association. Indeed the student of Appalachian literature will look in vain for the mark of Kroll or Stuart in the work of Still. If it is there, it is only as obverse reflection, as determination to avoid the sentimental deployment of the Appalachian myth, often tending toward caricature, which pervades the work of Kroll, Stuart, and West. From his earliest published efforts, the *Atlantic* and *Sewanee Review* and *Yale Review* stories and poems of the 1930s, Still's work is marked by a discipline, a precision, a restraint, and an economy which one seeks in vain in the work of his Lincoln Memorial University contemporaries.

James Still enrolled at Vanderbilt University in September 1929 after having considered attending either Duke University or the University of North Carolina. He was awarded his M.A. in English in June 1930. He had classes with Walter Clyde Curry, John Crowe Ransom, John Donald Wade, and Wilfred Walker. His advisor was Edwin Mims. His thesis, "The Function of Dreams and Visions in the Middle English Romances," directed by Curry, is signed also by Mims and Ransom. It was a "tough year," as Still recalls: "My two meals a day consisted of a ten-cent bowl of cereal in the morning and a thirty-five cent supper at a boarding-house: slim rations for a growing boy tackling Middle English." He worked very hard for Curry's Chaucer class, spending "seventeen hours in preparation for each of the two classes per week." Because of his intensive reading in American literature before he arrived at Vanderbilt, Still did not have to work as hard for Wade as he did for Curry. He recollects:

During the first week in the American Literature class Dr. Wade tested us on our familiarity with the authors of note from the Civil War forward. He read passages from various

works and we were to identify the authors. My score was perfect. Nobody else made a passing grade. Dr. Wade called me to his office and tested me further. The verdict was: "You don't have time to bother with my class. Just drop in once in a while and learn what we're up to." Or some such statement. I took him at his word and skipped every other class. My contribution to "The History of American Literature" the class composed was the chapter on Cotton and Increase Mather. Some twenty years later when Katherine Anne Porter told me she was writing a book on the Mathers I was prepared to discuss the subject at length.³

Such reminiscences yield a vivid sense of Vanderbilt in Still's student days. More important than such classroom recollections, for present purposes, is Still's recall of events beyond the classroom, events which define the tenor of the times in Nashville. He remembers attending several lectures by Mims at a Methodist Church, lectures "on the subject of Evolution, the monkey trials at Dayton being a sizzling issue of the day." He recalls the "considerable disregard," amply documented elsewhere, in which some faculty members held Mims's *The Advancing South*. Still's year at Vanderbilt was momentous—

. . . the year of *I'll Take My Stand*. Ransom and Wade read their chapters to us. . . . Andrew Lytle was at Sewanee and came to read a play of his to us, but not from this book. . . . *I'll Take My Stand* was a pioneer undertaking, a seminal work.⁴

After Still left Vanderbilt in 1930, he took a degree in library science at the University of Illinois. In 1932, he became the librarian at the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, in the hill-country of eastern Kentucky, where he has been rooted ever since. This aspect of Still's life and work—his immersion in place—has been remarked by every commentator on his work. In fact, over the past half century and with a quickening pace in the past decade, observers have more or less made Still out to be a kind of legendary autochthon of the mountains, the *deus loci* or at least the *genius loci* of the Kentucky mountains. All of this commentary, most of it in Appalachian regional reviews, has overlooked Still's connection with Vanderbilt agrarianism. More

importantly, it has done Still the disservice of whittling his niche solely in the the contexts of Appalachian literature. When an interviewer recently asked Still about "Appalachian literature" he allowed as how that would be "fairly restrictive"; "Southern literature," he said, "is good enough for me."⁵

It would be folly to construct an elaborate thesis regarding the influence of Vanderbilt agrarianism on Still. It must suffice here to say that Still's career as a poet and writer of fiction begins shortly after his 1929-1930 sojourn at Vanderbilt, a year and a place which mark one of the most fertile crossroads of twentieth-century literary and intellectual history. Few writers have been as free of the polemical temperament as has been Still. Readers will look in vain for agrarian exhortation in his work. Yet it might be argued that Still represents in all of the best senses the kind of stand—as man and artist—for which the Nashville agrarians called. While it may be true, as some observers have noted, that the agrarian manifestos overlooked the Appalachian South, that they were written from a point of view alien to the Appalachian sensibility, it must be asserted that the general conditions of deracination and dehumanization as a consequence of industrialism prevailed in the hills and minefields of eastern Kentucky. The qualities, moreover, which the Nashville agrarians valued as the pillars of resistance to the insidious spirit of progress and industrialism—tenacious family land tenure, sense of place, community, and tradition—were perhaps stronger in the Kentucky hills than elsewhere in the South.⁶

After Vanderbilt, then, Still settled in the hills. He describes his settling-in period:

After six years of schoolkeeping at the forks of Troublesome Creek in Knott county, I moved nine miles farther back in the hills to a century-old log house between the waters of Dead Mare Branch and Wolfpen, on Little Carr Creek. These streams boxed me in. I raised my own food and stored vegetables and fruits for the cold months; I kept two stands of bees for their honey, and for the ancient custom of "telling the bees". . . . I joined the folk life of the scattered community, attending church meetings, funeralizing, corn pullings, hog butcherings, box-suppers at the one-room school, sapping parties, and gingerbread elections.⁷

Still's version of agrarianism, clearly, is not a call to political action, not a symbolic stance from which to go forth into the world of letters and a peripatetic academic career as it was for so many other Nashville agrarians. It is a design for living. It need not be insisted that this is a deliberate position, a conscious stand-taking for Still. Indeed in the same passage cited above, he goes on to say: "When I moved from Troublesome Creek to the backwoods of the county I had expected to stay only for a summer. I have remained forty years (now closer to fifty years)." Yet it was, or soon became, a more deliberate matter than this last suggests. For example, in one of his early poems, "Mountain Heritage," which has the force of personal testament, Still asserts: "I shall not leave these prisoning hills. . . . I cannot leave." The speaker is one with the hills, "one with the fox / Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal."⁸

The first time Still left his log-house "stand" for any period of time was in 1941, when he joined the army and went overseas:

I was on another continent and longing for home when I pencilled this verse of recollection: "How it was in that place, how light hung in a bright pool of air like water, in an eddy of cloud and sky, I will long remember. . . . Earth loved more than any earth, stand firm, hold fast; Trees burdened with leaf and wing, root deep, grow tall."⁹

Still's postage stamp of adopted soil has been, then, a "stand," a terrain in which he has been able to hold tight, to "hold fast," and to gather the strength of a man rooted as a tree.

What are the consequences of this stand for his art? Looked at from the perspective of Nashville agrarianism, Still would appear to be the very artist called for in *I'll Take My Stand*. Donald Davidson, in "A Mirror for Artists," outlines how the arts have prospered, traditionally, in agrarian societies "where the goodness of life was measured by a scale of values having little to do with the material values of industrialism; where men were never too far removed from nature to forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature." Under the insidious sway of industrialism, Davidson argues, this sense of life and art is lost; the artist becomes the adversary of the community, becomes alienated man, deracinated man. It is very rare to find in America an "artist slowly maturing his powers in full communion with a society of

which he is an integral part." The more we consider the details of Davidson's formula for the artist in an agrarian society, the more we are likely to discern the face of Still in that mirror. For example, Davidson lists the artistic resources of the agrarian South:

The South has been rich in the folk-arts, and is still rich in them—in ballads, country songs and dances, in hymns and spirituals, in folk tales, in the folk crafts. . . . Though these are best preserved in mountain fastnesses and remote rural localities, they were not originally so limited. . . .¹⁰

These are the very resources which Still has employed skillfully in his work. Davidson concludes that the artist "will do best to flee the infection of our times" and take his stand within an agrarian tradition. It should not be understood that Davidson and the Nashville Agrarians were urging artists to "flee" to the hills and become subsistence farmers, subsistence poets—although some observers persist in reading them in that fashion. (One need not join with Jesse Stuart in laughing at the pathetic tomato plants he observed in the gardens of certain Nashville Agrarians—plants to which he often alluded.) Yet, one thrust of agrarianism is most certainly practical, and it makes as much sense to see *I'll Take My Stand* as a concrete pattern for life and work as it does to regard it as metaphor, or as theoretical underpinning for an academic-literary career.

Indeed, there are "dropouts" of the 1960s and 1970s who cherish *I'll Take My Stand* as a kind of manifesto, still valid and vital—much of it—after all this time. They are not "dropouts" at all, in the usual journalistic sense of the term; rather, they have done precisely what Davidson and Lytle and others were talking about in 1930—they have fled the infection of the times, fled the nightmare of urban America (or the daydream of suburban America), and they have "dropped in," into what remains of agrarian society, many of them to stay, to take root in place, in community, to cultivate the soil as well as the crafts and arts to which Davidson alludes, to sing the very songs and hymns and ballads which he so cherished. Many of them have followed Lytle's 1930 injunction: "Throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall." If *I'll Take My Stand* yet possesses the power to inspire or affirm such action in subsequent times, what must have

been its force in 1930, for a young man from the Alabama hills who, as a student at Vanderbilt, participated in the excited discussion of agrarian matters? An immense force, one may infer. "Pioneer," Still calls it, and "seminal"—both terms are charged and will serve to reinforce this thesis: of all the Vanderbilt writers, including those who have been students and teachers there in the past six decades and have gone on to careers as writers, James Still is the central exemplar of the agrarian tradition.

If agrarianism is the text here, then regionalism is the subtext, for more often than not the literary issue of agrarianism is one form or another of regionalism. It is the quality of this latter "-ism" which makes all the difference. If one deployed as paving stones all the books which have exploited ostensibly quaint and curious folks in isolated places, which have mishandled dialect and folk speech, which have awkwardly praised and patronized their "local color" subjects, we might have a broad new road from Nashville to the heart of the Kentucky hills. There is no space here to deal with this long-standing problem in American (and world) literature; perhaps a pedagogical anecdote will suffice. In the course of teaching seminars in regionalism, in Southern and Appalachian literature (or even Catskills and Adirondack lore and literature), one discovers how badly this novelist or that poet handles this or that problem of literary regionalism. These deficiencies should be examined against two touchstones. The first is Robert Penn Warren's essay, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists":

Regionalism is not quaintness and local color and folklore, for those things when separated from a functional idea are merely a titillation of the reader's sentimentality or snobbishness. . . . Regionalism based on the literary exploitation of a race or society that has no cultural continuity with our own tends to be false and precious. . . . Regionalism does not mean that literature is tied to its region for application . . . , does not imply in any way a relaxing of critical standards.¹¹

The successful regional writer is never insistently self-conscious regarding his regionalism. He writes out of, not about, a profound sense of place. He sees in and through and because of intense localism, a way of seeing, a vision that is purged by a kind of

ongoing sacramental relationship with the near and common things of his place and community. James Still's *River of Earth* represents one precise formal embodiment of these principles; it incarnates all of the best notions concerning how to write "regional" fiction. The second touchstone, and of similar significance, is Kentuckian Allen Tate's rumination, in a 1929 letter to Donald Davidson: "Our true Southern novelist at present is Elizabeth Roberts, who does not write as a Southerner or as anything else." She is not a purveyor of sociological theses. Like Hemingway, she "sticks to concrete experience"; she has "that sense of a stable world, of a total sufficiency of character, which we miss in modern life."¹² The characterization of Roberts's fiction exactly fits the work of her friend, James Still; indeed, had Still's work been available a decade earlier, at the time of the agrarian deliberations concerning regional fiction, *River of Earth* would have served them well as a touchstone. Decades later, they had discovered this. (See, for example, Cleanth Brooks's praise of Still's mastery, in the foreword to *The Run for the Elbertas*.) In 1971, Tate wrote to Still:

I have just read it [*River of Earth*]¹³—one of the few novels I have read in a decade. I regret that I didn't see it years ago. It is a brilliant and moving novel. Moreover, in my opinion, it is a masterpiece of style. The subtle modulation between the mountain speech of the dialogue and the formal, yet simple, diction of the narrative is masterly.¹³

II

That was their way. Lonely folk, but a blessing
to each other, for the beasts, and for the earth.
Knut Hamsun¹⁴

At the heart of Still's fiction and poetry is a master motif, a core image, based on the rivers and creeks which "glean the valleys."¹⁵ Four of his books have titles which draw on this reservoir of river-creek imagery: *River of Earth*, *On Troublesome Creek*, *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek*, and *Sporty Creek: A Novel About an Appalachian Boyhood*. Moreover, at

least eighteen poems and seven short stories take their titles from creeks, and as many more draw key images from rivers or creeks. Consider some of the rivers and creeks, the prongs and forks and branches in Still's fiction:

Big Ballard, Biggety, Big Greasy, Big Leatherwood, Big John Riggins Creek, Boone's Fork, Broad Creek, Buckeye Branch, Cain Creek, Crazy Creek, Cutshin, Dead Mare Branch, Defeated Creek, Dry Creek, Fern Branch, Fight Creek, Goose Creek, Grassy Creek, He Creek (which joins She Creek), Keg Branch, Kentucky River, Lairds Creek, Lean Neck, Left Hand Fork, Left Troublesome, Letts Creek, Little Angus, Little Carr, Lower Flat Creek, Pigeon Roost, Quicksand Creek, Redbird River, Red Fox Creek, Roaring Fork, Rockhouse Creek, Salt Lick, Sand Lick, Shepherd's Creek, Shikepoke Creek, Shoal Creek, Short Fork, Slick Branch, Smacky Creek, Snag Fork, Snaggy Creek, Sporty Creek, Surrey Creek, Tight Hollow Branch, Troublesome Creek, Upper Logan Creek, Willow Branch, Wolfpen.

These are just some of the waters which flow through some of Still's fiction (*River of Earth*, *Run for the Elbertas*, and *Pattern of a Man*). Indeed, since more than fifty streams flow through one novel and less than two dozen short stories, one might state this premise: it's a mighty dry Still story that does not have a creek or two shaping it in some way.

What conclusions might be drawn from this riparian inventory? First, the student of place-names will observe that the Appalachian flair for naming is manifested amply here. Then, the scholar considering Still's career will note his enduring concern with the actual places of his chosen earth, a preoccupation going back to Still's earliest publications, such as his scholarly note, "Place Names in the Cumberland Mountains," published while he was a graduate student at Vanderbilt.¹⁶ There, Still writes: "Names given to creeks, ridges, hollows, and villages in the Cumberland Mountains have a peculiarity all their own. They often represent some characteristic of the thing named which is overlooked by the outsider." Noting the difficulty of citing reasons for some of the designations, he concludes: "They seem to have sprung out of the fertile imagination of the mountaineer." It seems much to the point of Still's career as "Appalachian artist" to pay heed to his early

mention of the possible incomprehension of the "outsider" as well as to the stress on the creativity of the hillfolk.

Other things might be said, too, about this rich plenty of streams, from the point of view of the geographer, the historian, and the social topographer of Still's corner of Appalachia. Streams in his fiction are—as, in fact, in some places they remain—the basic *roads* of that country. In addition, identity and sense of place are shaped, defined by creeks. When the narrator in "A Master Time," a story in *Pattern of a Man*, says he wasn't born on Logan Creek, but in a neighboring valley, a native of Logan exclaims: "Upon my word and honor! Are ye a heathen?" Political life, too, follows the design of the creeks: in "Pattern of a Man," which is concerned with the election of a county jailor, we find that "all the main creeks have one candidate." The fiction, then, accurately reflects the lay of the land, the flow of the creeks.

Far more important, however, is the way in which the creeks provide the deep form of Still's work. The litany of creeks recited above evokes—for the literary critic as for the topophile—a sense of the rhythm of life, a resonance of place and time, community and history. A pilgrim's progress through that creek-country reminds the wayfarer of history at Boone's Fork, of loss and danger at Dead Mare Branch, at Quicksand, Shoal and Snaggy Creeks, of suffering and triumph at Defeated and Fight Creeks, of complexity and paradox at Cain and Crazy and Troublesome Creeks, of nature's plenty as well as leanness and pollution at Pigeon Roost, Redbird, Red Fox, and Shikepoke, at Lean Neck and Tight Hollow, at Big Greasy. None of this is forced allegorical topography or heavy-handed *paysage moralisé*; it is natural, cumulative reverberation which issues finally in the sense that the core image of the work is in the creeks, the ritual lustration in the text and the sacred subtext of Still's Kentucky.

All of the foregoing concerns—and the very heart of Still's agrarian vision—are best exemplified in his masterpieces. When *River of Earth* appeared in 1940, one reviewer welcomed it as one of the best novels about hillfolk, declaring that "Mr. Still has distinguished himself principally in his restraint, avoiding Jesse Stuart's often faked heartiness and the cheap, easily written incidents which merely shock but which Erskine Caldwell thinks are good writing." In another review, Stephen Vincent Benét praised it: "It is rich with sights, sounds, and smells, with the feel and taste of things. And it is rich, as well, with salty and earthy

speech, the soil of ballad and legend and tall story. . . . You can call it regional writing if you like—but to say so is merely to say that all America is not cut off the same piece." Another reviewer could find no one with whom to compare Still except Elizabeth Madox Roberts: "He is fully her equal in fusing the most realistic objectivity with the most intense inwardness of mood." Shortly after this spate of favorable reviews an essay appeared in *College English* which considered the work of Still and Jesse Stuart to be a significant development in the hillfolk tradition, an important move away from the stories (such as those of Mary Murfree) which were "about a place rather than of it." The essay concluded that, especially in Still's work, "the Southern mountaineer has found his own voice for the first time. This regionalism is as genuine and untainted as any we have in America today."¹⁷ Such a judgment may be useful, but there is danger in it, too, danger of falling into an all-too-familiar "native son" parochial authenticity syndrome as the basis for evaluation. And surely it has been a disservice to Still to regard him solely under the rubric of Appalachian literature, and to yoke him with Stuart (a pattern established by this early essay). Rather, Still's primary credentials are those of the engaged artist. With the hand of a master stylist, he carves his regional materials into a vision of universal validity.

River of Earth, skillfully told from a boy's point of view, is a narrative achievement which deserves comparison with the finest work (especially that which employs a boy-narrator) of Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Twain. The novel spans two years in the life of a Kentucky hill family, stretched over a cyclic framework which associates spring with the closing of the coal mines and a return to the farm from the grimy coal camps, and fall with the reopening of the mines and a return from the land to the slag piles, sooty mist, and oily flames of the coal camps. It is a pattern of agrarian-industrial contrasts which delineates Still's theme: in this world of motion, mechanization and deracination, man needs "a place certain and enduring." The theme is a familiar one, but Still's engaged treatment gives fresh, vital force to this convention of the hillfolk tradition, of Southern and agrarian literature, of American experience.

Father, Brack Baldridge, is a coal miner who still owns his small subsistence farm but lives on it intermittently. He is forever moving to different coal camps as one mine closes and another opens. Mother, Alpha Middleton Baldridge, has no time for the

coal camps; she wants to stay in one place where she can keep a garden and make a home. The children come alive in the voice of the narrator, who, by his seventh birthday, has seen enough of coal camps to know his own mind: "I would learn to plow, and have acres of my own. Never would I be a miner digging a darksome hole."¹⁸ As the novel opens, the Baldridges are on their own farm on Blackjack Creek; food is so scarce that Mother burns down the house to get rid of some persistent kinfolk; then the Baldridges move into their smokehouse, where at last they feel "contented and together." (6)

Still's treatment of this situation may seem an ironic inversion of the usual agrarian or Southern sense of family; but, in fact, the extended family here has become not only a nuisance but a burden, as well. The visiting relations are outwitted in order, first, to protect limited resources from larger demands for food and, second, to meet the family's need for communion among themselves. While it is a slim existence they have in the smokehouse, it is not bleak; it is, in fact, a kind of triumph. And the people in the towns, in the coal camps, are not nearly as well off: "There was hunger in the camps. We believed that we fared well, and did not complain." (12)

But the primary business of the first part of the novel is to define the conflict between father and mother, a definition accomplished in discussions of the relative virtues of farm and town (or coal camp). Father spends his time anticipating the reopening of the mines:

No use stirring the top of the ground if you're going to dig your bread underside. . . . I never tuck natural to growing things, planting seeds and sticking plows in the ground. . . . A sight of farming I've done, but it allus rubbed the grain. But give me a pick, and I'll dig as much coal as the next 'un. I figure them mines won't stay closed forever. (35, 47)

On the other hand, when a move back to the coal-camp seems imminent, Mother asserts her reasons for wanting to stay on the home place: "I allus had a mind to live on a hill, not sunk in a holler where the fog and dust is damping and blacking. I was raised to like a lonesome place." (51) Faced with her husband's stubbornness, she laments:

Forever moving yon and back, setting down nowhere for good and all, searching for God knows what. . . Where air we expecting to draw up to? . . . Forever I've wanted to set us down in a lone spot, a place certain and enduring, with room to swing arm and elbow, a garden-piece for fresh victuals, and a cow to furnish milk for the baby. So many places we've lived—the far side one mine camp and next the slag pile of another. Hardburly. Lizzyblue. Tribbey. I'm longing to set me down shorely and raise my chaps proper. (51)

Although she always follows her husband she never ceases hoping for her "place." Again and again she speaks her mind: "Nigh we get our roots planted, we keep pulling them up and planting in furrin ground. . . . Moving is an abomination. . . . Since I married I've been driv from one coal camp to another. . . . I reckon I've lived everywhere on God's green earth. Now I want to set me down and rest. . . . We done right well this crop. We've got plenty." (179-182)

Alpha comes naturally by her agrarian vision, for her mother, Grandma Middleton, has never left the farm; she views the coal-camps as a strange intrusion in the hills. Bemoaning the fact that her daughter married "a coal digger, a mole-feller, grubbing his bread underground," she tells her grandson: "Allus I'd wanted her to choose one who lived on the land, growing his own victuals, raising sheep and cattle, beholden to nobody." (130)

But the agrarian debate extends beyond family conversations, for appearing at significant moments in the tale is the legendary figure of Walking John Gay. The first mention occurs in juxtaposition with Mother's longing for her place; she describes and defines him:

I saw Walking John Gay once when I was a child. . . . Walking John Gay traipsing and trafficking, looking the world over. Walked all the days of his life; seen more of creation than any living creature. A lifetime of going and he's got nowhere, found no peace. (52)

Still focuses the reader's attention on Walking John Gay by skillful indirection; after Uncle Jolly mentions him in passing, the boy-narrator wonders, "Who is Walking John Gay? Somewhere I

heered that name." Having received no answer to his last question, he persists, "Where does Walking John Gay live?" Finally, the boy is acknowledged and four pages of anecdotes follow. Uncle Jolly recalls how he saw Gay once long ago and asked: "Looky here, John Walkabout, where air ye forever going? What air ye expecting to see you've never saw yet? Hain't the head o'one holler pine-blank like the next 'un?" Grandma Middleton recalls how Walking John Gay had visited her and her husband, Boone Middleton, a long time ago on Lean Neck Creek, and how Boone had asked him questions till after dark:

I got a bundle o'questions to ask you who've traveled these mountains. . . . What about them bee-gum rocks in the breaks of the Big Sandy? Tell where's that beech tree standing Dan'l Boone whittled his name on? I'm blood kin to ol' Dan'l. Have you seed a single pair o' wild pigeons the earth over?

And Grandma recollects what Walking John Gay said: "They's a world o'dirt flowed under my feet. I never crawled when I was a baby. Just riz up and walked at ten months. I'm a-mind to see every living hill against I die." (139-141)

There is a direct connection between the haunting figure of Walking John Gay and Brother Sim Mobberly's sermon, the important passage which gives the novel its title. The words used by Walking John Gay—"They's a world o' dirt flowed under my feet"—not only convey the sense of flow and motion which pervade the tale, but they also echo the preacher's words: "Oh, my children, where air we going on this mighty river of earth?" (76) A close look at this key passage is essential, since it centers the novel and exemplifies Still's mastery.

The boy-narrator watches the preacher come to the pulpit:

A fleece of beard rose behind the pulpit, blue-white, blown to one side as though it hung in a wind. A man stood alone, bowed, not yet ready to lift his eyes. He embraced the pulpit block. He pressed his palms gently upon the great Bible, touching the covers as though they were living flesh. His eyes shot up, green as water under a mossy bank, leaping over the faces turned to him. . . . (75-76)

The careful reader notices here that the creeks which shape the fiction flow *through* the preacher who is about to address his river of earth theme. He lifts a finger, plunges it into the Bible, selecting a text at random, and then looks down "to see what the Lord had chosen":

He began to read. I knew then where his mouth was in the beard growth. "The sea saw it and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs. Tremble, thou earth. . . ." He snapped the book to. He leaned over the pulpit. "I was borned in a ridge-pocket," he said. "I never seed the sun-ball withouten heisting my chin. My eyes were sot upon the hills from the beginning. Till I come on the word in this good Book, I used to think a mountain was the standingest object in the sight o' God. Hit says here they go skipping and hopping like sheep, a-rising and a-falling. These hills are jist dirt waves, washing through eternity. My brethren, they hain't a valley so low but what hit'll rise agin. They hain't a hill standing so proud but hit'll sink to the low ground o'sorrow. Oh, my children, where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a dying—the living and the dead riding the waters? Where air it sweeping us? (76)

The boy is distracted, dozes off, does not hear the rest of the sermon. But when he walks home afterwards, he says "a great voice walked with me, roaring in my head."

The preacher's primary text is Psalm 114, a song in commemoration of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Marvelous things take place in nature, the mountains skip, the earth trembles. After the preacher closes the Bible, he alludes to other scriptural passages: "My eyes were sot upon the hills" echoes the familiar Psalm 121. Then, echoing Isaiah 40:4, he considers the sinking hills: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low." Finally, in his river of earth image, he returns, at some poetic remove, to the end of Psalm 114, where the rock is turned into water, "the flint into a fountain of waters."

What does this mosaic amount to as homiletic text? A hymn of wonder, a celebration of the deliverance of God's chosen people, and in the Isaiah passage, the promise of "comfort," of salvation in the Messiah, for not only will the valleys be exalted but the

"crooked shall be made straight . . . and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." But we must ask, too, what the sermon accomplishes in the novel. Its immediate context is a "funeralizing." Thus it raises, in wonder and awe, the question of human destiny, man's place in time and eternity, and implies for those who know enough scripture to grasp the unstated connection, the hope of salvation. Yet, if this is the sacred text, we must also see that the sermon serves the novel as a subtext in which the skipping hills and trembling earth are directly associated with the ravaged garden of Kentucky, with eroded farmland, burning slag piles, coal-camps, and polluted creeks. Indeed, we have finally an anguished, ironic inversion of Psalm 114, desperately inquiring *are* we the Lord's people, *is* there deliverance, *is* there comfort for us?

The sermon echoes throughout the novel. For example, as the sermon ends, Father reads a letter which tells them that Uncle Jolly is in jail for dynamiting a mill dam. Mother says that no man has a right to hold back the waters, to let nothing up or down. Later we find out that Uncle Jolly has dynamited the dam so the fish can get upstream to spawn. Although his deed is done in the service of the plenitude of nature, he serves his time. When he is released, he opens the dam again. Jordan driven back, the earth must tremble.

The sermon resonates in other ways. The boy-narrator, for example, sees in terms of rivers. He watches his father build a roaring fire: "The top of the stove reddened, the cracks and seams of the cast iron becoming alive, traced like rivers on a map's face." (66) His general sense of wonder about rivers converges with the text of the sermon. In the chapter following the funeral, he is at school, where the talk turns to rivers, to "the biggest river ever was":

"Biggest river I ever saw was the Kentucky, running off to the blue-grass, and somewhere beyond."

"It's a river in South America, far off south, many thousands of miles."

"There's a place called South Americkee, over in Bell County. Now hit's the truth."

"This river is the Amazon. . . ."

"I looked that word up in the dictionary and it said Amazon was a fighting woman. River or woman, I don't know

which." (84-85)

Thus in a brief passage, without overt linkage, Still plays a subtle variation on the river of earth motif, evokes again the sense of wonder, particularizes, localizes the universal, and even, perhaps, suggests Mother's identity as a kind of Amazon, a fighting woman of the Kentucky creeks: river or woman, or "river-woman," *genius loci*, tutelary water spirit, enduring naiad of the hills.

In manifold ways, then, the sermon is both source and confluence of meaning, image, symbol. River of earth, or world of dirt, it flows as steadily as time and the creeks. When Uncle Jolly is teaching the narrator how to plow, how to "tend dirt proper," lest the hills "wear down to a nub" (the hills shall "be made low"), the boy has an agrarian epiphany:

The earth parted; it fell back from the shovel plow; it boiled over the share. I walked the fresh furrow and balls of dirt welled between my toes. There was a smell of old mosses, of bruised sassafras roots, of ground new-turned. . . . The share rustled like drifted leaves. It spoke up through the handles. I felt the earth flowing, steady as time. (134-5)

The narrator knows his dream at an early age—to avoid "digging in a darksome hole," to grow roots and tend the earth—but the novel is not a serene mountain pastoral, for the agrarian *locus amoenus* is under terrific assault by the coal economy, and the hold of the Baldridges in the land is tenuous at best.

Toward the end of the novel, the connection between Walking John Gay and the Baldridges is made explicit. About to set off again to look for work in the mines, Brack says: "I was born to dig coal. . . . Somewhere they's a mine working. Fires still burning the world over, and they got to be fed. All the hearthstones in North Americkee hain't gone cold." To this Uncle Jolly replies: "Be-grabs if you folks hain't a pack o'Walking John Gays, allus a-going, don't warm one spot o'ground for long." Mother is in labor with imminent birth and thus she is not on the scene to reiterate her dream; so Uncle Jolly, who has at times seemed more akin to Walking John Gay—wandering the hills, spending time in jail for his pranks—becomes the spokesman for the opposition: "I aim to settle, I've got me a young mule, new ground cleared, and soon to have a doughbeater fair as ever drew breath. Bees to work my red

apple trees, grapevines." (241-42) The novel ends, then, with Uncle Jolly staying on the land, and the Baldridges going off to find a working mine somewhere; but to the last, Mother holds to her vision of "a place certain and enduring."

Is this, then, an agrarian thesis novel? No, for there is nothing in it of the polemic, the exhortation. Still eschews the easy answers. Brack Baldridge is anything but a caricature of the deracinated man. Indeed, in his lust for the mines this earthy "mole-feller" is a haunting autochthon of another variety (akin to the miner in the ballad "Dark as a Dungeon," with his "lust" for the "lure of the mine.") Moreover, Still lifts the coal camp wandering of the Baldridges from the level of mere job-seeking by introducing the Walking John Gay motif and the "river of earth" imagery. The Daniel Boone allusions (and kinship) invite the reader to ponder the tale in larger terms. Boone, of course, was an ambiguous figure: was he one of the official makers of the American nation, preparing the way in the wilderness for homes and farms "certain and enduring," or was he the ur-figure of American rootlessness, ever fleeing the advance of settlements and civilization? As the novel speaks to concerns generally American, it poses the question: Is there room in a nation whose experience has been and continues to be primarily a matter of mobility and placelessness (in the deepest sense) for a "place certain and enduring"?

Much of the business of the novel suggests the motif of the intrusion of a "machine in the garden." In Still's world, there is yet something left of the garden—patches of soil "rich as sin," and the compellingly beautiful coming of spring to the hills, for example. But the "metal groan of the coal conveyor" has come to the once green mountain valleys and shattered and blackened a world. In the crowded coal camps, perfect miniatures of the industrial city, there is no room for a garden or stock, and when the mine slows, hunger comes; spirit and morals decay as the blanket of soot covers everything. Without a note of hortatory protest, Still enumerates the evils that have come with the machine into this particular garden. Children look for fish in a coal camp creek:

The waters ran yellow, draining acid from the mines,
cankering rocks in its bed. The rocks were snuffy brown,
eaten and crumbly. There were no fishes swimming the
eddies, nor striders looking at themselves in the waterglass. (189)

The very rocks crumble; the river of earth flows darkly. Where the timber has been recklessly cut, the land is "a-wasting and a-washing," as Uncle Jolly says when he is teaching his nephew "how to tend dirt proper." And he asks that question which still reverberates; "What's folks going to live on when these hills wear down to a nub?" (134)

All of this amounts to the familiar motif of the ravaged American landscape. Indeed, according to long-established (since the mid-1800s) conventions of Appalachian literature, the hill-country landscape is seen as the most compelling and perhaps the most *American* landscape; yoked with this awareness in Still's work is the sense of the ruin wrought in the hills by the machine, by the mines, which has been more complete and more devastating than anywhere else on the North American continent, taking the cycle of mountain gloom and mountain glory back to mountain gloom. Thus, in one sense, *River of Earth* provides the grim epitome of a pervasive image in Appalachian and American literature, with its version of the befouled "green breast" of the hills, something—to paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway—commensurate to man's capacity for horror. One can only wonder that there was never a Southern mountain *I'll Take My Stand*, since the issues were much the same, although intensified far beyond anything the lowland South could imagine.

It is in this context that Mother's longing for a "place," together with Uncle Jolly's agrarian vision, becomes the central thrust of the novel, played off against the design suggested by Father, the coal-digging wanderer, and Walking John Gay. *River of Earth*, then, belongs in the company of such hillfolk vignettes as Faulkner's MacCallum episode in *Flags in the Dust*. It stands as one of the finest novels of the hillfolk mythos and one of the more profound embodiments in fiction of agrarianism.

III

Et in Arcadia ego.¹⁹

"Et in Appalachia ego": is this an apt rubric to inscribe on the rich canvas of James Still's life and work? And, if so, which reading of the old emblem are we to take as primary resonance? Is it the pastoral voice—in the classical convention, a shepherd, in

the romantic tradition, more often than not, a hill-person—reminiscing on the idyllic life in an enchanted symbolic landscape? Often indeed, in Appalachian writing (and other hillfolk settings), hill people are depicted as simple, primitive people living charmed lives in a kind of mindless Arcadia. But this paraphrase of the old rubric is not intended to suggest such a “local color” reading of Still. Rather, it posits the rich complex of feeling implicit in the phrase, properly apprehended. Anyone who knows Erwin Panofsky’s seminal study of the history of the motif in art, its ambivalence, its shifts in meaning, will catch the flavor of Still’s Appalachian Arcadian world.²⁰ It is precisely in the tension between pastoral and tragedy, in the tension between the romantic mistranslation of the phrase—“I too have been in Arcadia”—and the older, darker, correct reading—“Even in Arcadia, there am I” (i.e., Death)—that one may locate the center of Still’s work. In Still’s Appalachian-agrarian world we find the plenitude of nature, a rich and living folk tradition, a sustaining sense of family and community, a vivifying sense of place, and an enduring sense of identity through place. We find also hunger, desperation, mechanization, deracination, violence, tragedy, and death.

To figure the matter another way, to move what may seem a great distance from Kentucky and Nashville agrarianism, let us briefly consider Still’s work in the contexts of the oldest agrarianism of all, the ancient Chinese agrarian cults. In his classic study, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, Marcel Granet writes about the “Holy Places,” the “ritual landscapes” where the peasants experienced in trees and rocks, in creeks and rivers

. . . the presence of a tutelary power whose sanctity sprang from every corner of the landscape, blessed forces which they strove to capture in every way. Holy was the place, sacred the slopes of the valley they climbed and descended, the stream they crossed . . . the ferns, the bushes, the white elms, the great oaks and the wood they took from them . . . the spring water . . . the animals which teemed . . . [all] shared in the holiness of the place.²¹

Granet writes of the communion and harmony of the peasants, with the land and each other, especially at festival times, of the sense of “rhythmic time,” “creative joy,” and “joyous power” expressed in the songs and games and rituals of the seasonal events

of the community. At the Autumn Festivals, food was central, the bountiful table an omen of plenty and an act of generosity which was "a matter of some moment for the honor of the family." The Autumn Festivals ritually marked the end of cultivation: "earth was sacralized," not to be touched again until spring. (45-46) What has all this to do with Still? Everything, for the *deus loci* which spoke to the ancient Chinese speaks eloquently in Still's work; the same "emblematism," as Granet has it, is at the heart of life in the Troublesome Creek country. The exact analogues for the ancient agrarian peasant festivals persist in the form of hog-killing gatherings and "stir-off" parties, the seasonal sorghum-making event marked by a feast, by games and songs, by a resacralization of the earth. In "The Stir-Off" depicted in *The Run for the Albertas*, Still's proud host at that autumn festival welcomes his guests with words which fit precisely the ancient ritual formula:

"We're old-timey people. . . . We may live rough, but we're lacking nothing. For them with muscle and backbone, Troublesome Creek country is the land o' plenty." He swept an arm toward gourds of lard, strings of lazy wife beans, and shelves of preserves; he snapped his fingers at cushaws hanging by bine tails. "We raise our own living, and once the house and barns are full we make friends with the earth. We swear not to hit it another lick till spring." (61)

A great deal more could be said along these lines, and it is a good direction for future study of Still. The correctness of such an approach is confirmed by Still's preoccupation with Mayan civilization. He has made many study trips to Yucatan, to Guatemala, and Honduras. In a recent interview, he remarked: "I've always been interested in primitive peoples," and he stressed further that "the thing that holds me is the great mystery of the disappearance of the Mayan people."²² Will future readers of Still's work ponder the mystery of the disappearance of the Appalachian people?

All of these matters—Nashville agrarianism, the Appalachian mythos, ancient agrarian peasant cults, and the mystery of Mayan civilization—are important touchstones for the study of Still. Yet we must not be led astray: He is not a polemicist, he is not, for all his interest in "primitive peoples," an anthropologist. And, while he is surely one of the finest "Appalachian writers" we are ever

likely to have, he is much more—a regionalist in the finest Southern Renaissance sense (and in that universal sense which we are reminded of by his carefully selected epigraphs for his work, from Verga, from Hamsun). A firm grasp of his “agrarianism” makes this clear. Yet the term agrarianism is a word which evokes a complex of values, a texture of experience, not likely to be much understood in the 1990s.

Must we, then, find one last category, more contemporary and fashionable, for Still, for the man and his work as a symbol and a text for our times? It is ecological wholeness. For the man who established himself in an enduring place (not as autochthon, but as *anachthon*, to coin a term more universally apt for the optative agrarian of the twentieth century), for the man who deliberately “joined the folk life of the community,” for the man who has always grown his own garden and experimented with plants, the “ecological wholeness” label is appropriate. For the writer, for the work, how useful is such a term? Karl Kroeber, in an essay concerned with Wordsworth’s “Home at Grasmere,” invokes Wordsworth our contemporary, Wordsworth the ecologist who

speaks for the profound, biologically rooted need for territorial security common to all men and against the conquest of space, most vividly apparent in the urbanizing of technological civilization which daily consumes more of our planet. . . .

Grasmere is no vacation spot, no mere place in respite from the fragmented restlessness of modern life. Nor is it a symbol of utopian existence. It is an authentic alternative. It is a genuine alternative because it is a real home.²³

Through this home, Kroeber suggests (in language that echoes Granet), Wordsworth appropriates a “truly ‘primitive’ response to nature,” a sense of “primal unity,” a sense of “innate ecological sensitivity,” which issue in poetry which is, at its best, “simply, joyous worship.” (138, 141) All of this constitutes what Kroeber calls “ecological holiness.” Still and Wordsworth occupy the same terrain of the spirit. Wordsworth addresses the Grasmere hill-country: “Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in”; Still declares: “I shall not leave these prisoning hills.” Prison or embrace, or both at once, Still and Wordsworth, each in his own

Cumberland Mountains, takes a stand, a stand which is personal and vocational, ecological and hieratic, humanly and aesthetically life-determining. They do not romanticize the harshness, the hard truths of their mountains. They seek "the acknowledged voice of life," in Wordsworth's phrase, which speaks "of what is done among the fields, / Done truly there, or felt, of solid good / And real evil. . . ." They seek, and find, a song "more harmonious" than "pastoral fancies." Wordsworth asks: "Is there such a stream, / . . . flowing from the heart / With motions of true dignity and grace?" There is indeed, and it takes its rise in James Still's Kentucky hill-country, flows through his lyrical chronicle, down all those troublesome creeks, and that vasty river of earth.

NOTES

¹This passage is the epigraph for James Still's *Pattern of a Man and Other Stories* (Lexington: Gnomon Press, 1976) and is taken from Giovanni Verga's *The House by the Medlar Tree*.

²All of the observations and quotations concerning Still's days at LMU and Vanderbilt are based on my conversations and correspondence with him. Also, see Still's published interviews in *Appalachian Journal* 6 (Winter 1979): 120-41 and in *The Iron Mountain Review* 2 (Summer 1984): 3-10. The latter is a conversation with Jim Wayne Miller.

³Author's communication with James Still.

⁴Author's communication with James Still.

⁵*Appalachian Journal* 6 (Winter 1979): 123.

⁶The best study of the question is Jim Wayne Miller's "A Post-Agrarian Regionalism for Appalachia," *Appalachian Heritage* 8 (Spring 1980): 58-71.

⁷"Afterword," *The Run for the Elbertas* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), p. 142.

⁸Printed as "Mountain Heritage," *New Republic* 85 (1935); as "Heritage" in *Hounds on the Mountain* (New York: Viking Press, 1937); as a signed broadside, again entitled "Heritage," in 1968; set to music for the bicentennial celebration of Transylvania College in 1983.

⁹*Run for the Elbertas*, p. 144.

¹⁰Donald Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), p. 55.

¹¹Robert Penn Warren, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists," *The American Review* 8 (November 1936): 148-50.

¹²John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 245.

¹³Tate's letter is in the correspondence held by Mr. Still.

¹⁴This passage is the epigraph for James Still's *The Run for the Elbertas* and is taken from Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*.

¹⁵See Still's poem, "Heritage."

¹⁶*American Speech*, 5 (December 1929): 113.

¹⁷The first review is in *Commonweal*, 23 February 1940; the next is from *Books*, 4 February 1940; the last is from the *Boston Transcript*, 10 February 1940. The study of Still and Stuart is Dayton Kohler, "Jesse Stuart and James Still: Mountain Regionalists," *College English* 3 (March 1942). Other studies of Still include Cratis D. Williams, *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction*, 1398-1432. (This is a Ph.D. dissertation, portions of which have been published in *Appalachian Journal*). Williams judges Still to be the most successful "mountain novelist" since Mary Murfree. Dean Cadle, in "Man on Troublesome," *Yale Review* 57 (1968), has high praise for Still and provides a good introduction to Still and his work. Recent essays by Fred Chappell, "The Seamless Vision of James Still," *Appalachian Journal* 8 (Spring 1981) and Jim Wayne Miller, "Appalachian Literature: A Home in this World," *The Iron Mountain Review*, 2 (Summer 1984), offer perceptive readings of the work. The summer 1984 issue of *Iron Mountain Review* is entirely devoted to Still and includes a useful interview and bibliography. An M.A. thesis by Terry McCoy, "James Still: A Coal Field Agrarian," Tennessee Technological University, 1980, is concerned with the "desire to return to the land" which is "central to Still's work." As this survey of Still criticism suggests, the contexts of appreciation and analysis remain somewhat narrowly regional.

¹⁸James Still, *River of Earth* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), p. 21; subsequent page references are to this edition and are included in the text.

¹⁹Inscription on a tomb, depicted in eighteenth-century paintings by Guercino, Poussin, and Reynolds.

²⁰Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego" in *Philosophy and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 223-54.

²¹Marcel Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, trans. Maurice Freedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 41-42.

²²James Still and Jim Wayne Miller, "'Daring to Look in the Well': A Conversation," *The Iron Mountain Review* 2 (Summer 1984): 6.

²³Karl Kroeber, "'Home at Grasmere': Ecological Holiness," *PMLA* 89 (January 1974): 132, 134; subsequent page references cited in the text.